

# Deadley Brotherhood: Local and Symbolic Factors in the Organization of White "Ultra-Right" Violence in South Africa and Protestant Paramilitarism in Northern Ireland

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#### **4. Deadly Brotherhood: Local and Symbolic Factors in the Organization of White "Ultra-Right" Violence in South Africa and Protestant Paramilitarism in Northern Ireland**

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This research comparing Afrikaners and Ulster Protestants was proposed in 1992 as part of a project of comparative ethnographic studies of the social organization of political and ethnic violence. The South African phase of the fieldwork was accomplished through a Post Doctoral Research Fellowship with the Graduate School "Market State and Ethnicity", at the University of Bielefeld-Sociology of Development Research Centre, funded by the German National Research Council (DFG). The fieldwork on Ulster Protestants was carried out while the author was a PHD candidate in anthropology at the University of Michigan.

My hypothesis was this: that two geographically dispersed calvinist settler societies have employed the social organizational strategies of semi-secret men's clubs and mass political rituals to pursue their political goals. Have the Ulster Protestants and the Afrikaners used these cultural and organizational elements in similar ways to solve similar historical problems?

The research in the field focused specifically on a comparison of the political cultures of the Afrikaans speaking Whites in South Africa and the Ulster Protestants in Northern Ireland. The

proposed research focused particularly on the history and modern roles of paramilitary organizations in these two calvinist settler societies located in two geographically dispersed former British colonies. It proposed to investigate, in South Africa, three basic factors in the social organization of ethno-political violence. These factors are social networks, symbols of identity and urban micro territoriality. These three interrelated socio-cultural factors were observed by the author to underlie the political strategies of Protestants in Northern Ireland based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the mid 1980's (Kenney 1991). I was particularly interested in comparing the political role of the Ulster Protestant "Twelfth of July" celebrations with the mass assemblies of Afrikaners occurring on the "Day of the Vow"(December 16) in South Africa. I was also interested in comparing the role of paramilitary organizations among Afrikaners with that of Loyalist paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland. For example, I wanted to know if the paramilitary AWB (*Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging*) are either publicly or unofficially involved in the main public rituals that celebrate Afrikaner ethnic and national identity.

Based on the ideas of Louis Hartz (1964) and Marvin Harris (1964) about the history and social dynamics of settler societies, I hypothesized that cultural and historical similarities would account for the apparent similarities in the "ethnic" and political organizational strategies of Protestants in Northern Ireland and Afrikaners. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that these apparent similarities in social organization would have functional consequences for the patterns of political events in the two countries. The first step in testing this hypotheses in terms adequate to both groups was to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in an Afrikaner community in South Africa to see if, in fact, the two groups have used secret societies and mass political rituals in similar ways to solve similar historical problems of ethnic competition during the colonial periods and to consolidate political power over native majorities after the ends of British rule.

A wider theoretical question is raised by this research. Are both situations cases of an ethnic organization of conflict? If so, what exactly is "ethnicity" seen as a social process and how and when should we use ethnicity as a scientific concept for the analysis of group relations (based on conflict, cooperation or peaceful coexistence) in complex societies? To answer these questions cross cultural field research must be carried out specifically on these issues. The terms ethnic group and ethnicity are being used, by social scientists and by the people directly involved in social movements, to describe a range of types of groups, popular movements and conflicts occurring in different parts of the world. To identify and describe the various sub types of ethnicity, based on cross cultural observation and comparison, is an urgent task of social science. The definition of ethnicity used in this study is that of F. Barth but it represents an attempt to go beyond his formulations in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969).

In South Africa I studied the role of symbolic processes in historical commemorations (those celebrations of ethnic and national identity) which take place as annual mass gatherings of the ethnic group. In both South Africa and Northern Ireland these public rituals include triumphal pageants (performed by one side of the conflict) and the mass funerals of martyr-heroes (staged by the other side). I studied some of the political and individual uses of the symbols of group identity observed in various public rituals. I see certain voluntary associations as the curators of the symbols of ethnic identity for an entire ethnic group. In this situation the groups' organizational symbols serve as the symbols of ethnic and individual identity for the majority of

the ethnic group that are not members of the organization (Buckley and Kenney 1995). I asked this question: Did the Afrikaner Broederbond (a semi-secret mens' club) play a similar role in Afrikaner ethnicity and politics as the Orange Order (also a semi-secret mens' club) has historically played among Ulster Protestants? This aspect of the research was based on participant observation of Afrikaner public rituals in South Africa.

Based on the work of Abner Cohen (1974) and Jeremy Boissevain (1965) - both social anthropologists who deal with the customary and strategic uses of symbols of group identity, local social organization, social clubs and national level politics - I examined Afrikaner public rituals in the context of social organization. What do the forms of social organization, made highly visible in mass ritual, generally reveal about the informal political structures and strategies characteristic of an ethnic group? What relation do the patterns and social networks so identified have to do with and history and the pattern of political events observed as the events are happening?

To answer these questions for the case of the Afrikaners, I conducted fieldwork to answer this specific question: What are the roles of localized support networks and the resulting functional semi-autonomy in the White organization of political violence in South Africa? Like in Northern Ireland are the Afrikaner paramilitary groups based in specific rural and rural localities where they enjoy the overt and covert support of the majority of the white ethnic group and base their operations in the micro territorial "defense and attack functions" (Boal 1976) of ethnic enclaves? If so, what is the historical basis of this communal acceptance of the operations of paramilitary organizations among Afrikaners (which is different from active support for all of their actions) and how does local autonomy conflict with centralized command structures of political parties and official paramilitary organizations? If so in the case of the Afrikaners, are the symbolic aspects of ethnicity (the rituals, mass gatherings and cultural organizations) related to locality and networks? The method used to obtain information on these aspects of the social organization of political violence was the ethnographic "community study" approach.

We can safely observe public aspects of the secret organization of violence in both the context of local social organization and public ritual because the public aspects are functional for the maintenance of the secret aspects. This visibility is part and parcel of the dynamics of popular support of violent movements and organizations. I discovered this by doing fieldwork in Northern Ireland but I hypothesized that similar social dynamics, at work in South Africa, would allow me to pursue this approach in the case of the Afrikaners. This assumption was basically correct although the vast spatial scale, and greater social complexity, of South Africa makes it much more difficult to literally "see" the relationships between the organizations in the Afrikaner political networks in public ceremonies and localized social interactions (including gossip). In the case of South Africa, more connections must be reconstructed from the reports of other observers.

I found that a struggle for the control of mass rituals of identity has been part of the AWB strategy during the past ten years. Since the early 1980's the AWB has conducted their own "Day of the Vow" gathering on December 17, held separately from the main Broederbond sponsored commemoration held at the Vortrekker Monument in Pretoria. This is like Northern Ireland, where paramilitary groups have managed to successfully take over popular holidays and public rituals from more conservative (in the sense of non-violent) ethnic and national organizations,

meaning that they now organize the main celebration (Kenney 1991). But while the participation rate of Afrikaners in their national rituals and annual mass gatherings is high, it has never been as complete and coordinated as that of Ulster Protestants in their organizations and rituals. At one mass meeting of Ulster Protestants in Belfast that I attended that was held to protest the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985, the assembled crowd was estimated at 100,000 people out of a total Ulster Protestant population of about one million.

The Afrikaners constitute a larger community. There are three million Afrikaners in South Africa and they are far more widely dispersed over a vast territory. It is probably harder to achieve functional political unity on the basis of informal networks and annual public rituals under such circumstances. Although the Ulster Protestants are characterized by many political factions operating within the larger ethnic group, they have until now been able to effectively unite and successfully oppose any suggestion of the rejoining of "their" six counties into an politically independent "united Ireland". While the Afrikaners have a self perceived history of failures of attempts to unite their factions and achieve unified political action, they effectively united under the leadership of the Nationalist Party and the Broederbond to rule South Africa, without compromise, from 1949 until 1990.

A comparison, based on the organization of the mainly Afrikaner "white Ultra right" in South Africa with the social organization of political violence in Northern Ireland (Kenney 1991) shows that while there is a strong local aspect to the AWB, white political violence is not mainly organized on the level of rural or urban neighborhoods, although the right to march or patrol armed and in uniform, to be granted the "freedom of the town", is certainly considered as a demonstration of strength of the local AWB in the Afrikaner dominated farm towns of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal.

Along with the tradition of public parading as an indicator of the fighting strength of a party or faction, like in Northern Ireland, local and regional history is a crucial factor in politically truculent and even rebellious armed bands of citizens, and even private armies, being considered a normal (if not always approved of) feature of "civil society" in some parts of the world. In South Africa, like in Northern Ireland, paramilitary organizations, observed in the local contexts, are hard to differentiate, in terms of membership and function, from gangs, militia, posses and vigilantes. For example, the UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force - an ultra violent Loyalist paramilitary organization formed in 1966) takes its name from the Unionist-Protestant force, founded during the First World War era, to fight against Irish independence. The AWB draws similar legitimacy from the tradition of the *Boer Kommandos*, the locally organized bands of armed farmers that fought against the British forces in the Anglo-Boer War.

As a frontier people, militia are part of Afrikaner social organization and political culture. The Boer Kommando not only fought British troops but also conducted punitive attacks against native enemies, the marauding Bantu warriors and Bushman cattle raiders of Afrikaner popular history. The very existence of the "laager" (a symbol of the "*Volk*") is dependant on it's band of intrepid, and violent, defenders.

A local history, making armed bands a part of the ethnic groups' political culture and a persistent (if controversial) feature of local community life, is an important factor in a situation of passive support or tolerance for the use of violence as a political strategy by violent organizations who can make a reasonable claim to represent an important aspect of a larger group's communal,

ethnic or national identity. I have argued elsewhere that this factor, reflecting Boal, Murray and Pooles' (1976) "defensive function" of the urban ethnic neighborhood, is largely responsible for popular support for the Provisional IRA in Catholic districts of Belfast (Kenney 1991). In a social organizational sense, such locally rooted paramilitary organizations are characterized by an overlapping pattern of membership with other local groups, including officially pacifistic ones like Churches. They are covertly part of the same social network system. The community's own "men of violence" are affected by its customary rules governing behavior to varying extents depending on how powerful or marginal the paramilitaries are in their home territories.

I found that, in contrast to Northern Ireland where local rural and urban neighborhoods are directly linked into a province wide network of organizations and the drama of political and ethnic violence is largely played out on the local stage, the operation of Afrikaner political networks are most significant on the regional and national levels. I think this is partly a reflection of geographic scale and the history of *Vortrekker* settlement patterns in South Africa north of the Cape.

The strongholds of the AWB and the Afrikaner "Ultra Right" in general are the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, especially in the "the deep North" where I did fieldwork. The Northern Transvaal is also a stronghold of the far right Conservative Party and of the white racist APK Church (*Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk*). This suggests that the politically functional aspects of networks are organized more on a regional basis rather than individual towns and rural neighborhoods. Afrikaner society was overwhelmingly rural until after the Anglo-Boer War (and especially during the Great Depression) when masses of Afrikaans-speaking poor Whites migrated to Johannesburg to find employment in industry.

The increasing wealth and upward social mobility of Afrikaners, as white South Africans in the post-Second World War period, have diluted this factor of local networks even more (although most of the AWB organizational activity in Johannesburg and Pretoria is centered in lower-middle class white housing areas directly bordering on Black townships). The spatial dimension of Apartheid has created some aspects of micro-territoriality that affect Whites too, where random violence and political confrontations do occur along White suburban-expanding Black township boundaries in this case. However major incidents of White Ultra Right political violence don't usually take place in these localized spatial and social contexts. The AWB has territorial strongholds, urban and rural, but they don't operate mainly on the local stage like the Loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland tend to do. In contrast, Black township violence is highly localized like in Northern Ireland (and is also a product of poverty and mass urbanization).

The Afrikaner "right wing" do organize as autonomous sub groups (public, semi secret and secret) with political violence being planned and carried out by the secret and rival factions. Although the AWB is the largest Afrikaner paramilitary organization, there are many small white supremacist groups who stockpile arms etc. Reports of the "Third Force", operating inside the army and police, are also true. In Northern Ireland, the covert links between the Protestant paramilitaries and the police and even the British army have always been an aspect of the dynamic of violence. In both cases there are many agents at work in the organization of violence and their relations to each other are similarly mysterious and clouded by speculation. These secret levels of the organization of political violence are probably too dangerous for social scientists to study

directly in any society characterized by communal and political violence. We can, however, study the public aspects.

The APK church is an aspect of this organizational pattern. This body broke away from the main branch of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa over the issue of racial integration of church services and congregations and is officially associated with the right wing Conservative Party. It is comparable in its history and political function with the Rev. Ian Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland. Like the Free Presbyterians the APK is also unofficially connected with paramilitary organizations, particularly with the AWB. While in South Africa, I investigated the role of the APK in Pretoria, in Ellisras in the Northern Transvaal and in the "Whites only" Volkstaat colony of Orania, located in the Northern Cape.

My fieldwork revealed that in Ellisras, a mining town in the Northern Transvaal, and in Orania the various factions and organizations (representing the whole spectrum of the Afrikaner political right), including the paramilitary organizations, are present in local communities and in the movement for Afrikaner territorial independence. These informal constellations of organizations are similar to the organizational patterns behind radical political factions in Northern Ireland. Such arrangements will prove typical, I believe, of other cases of the social organization of political violence viewed cross-culturally.

Now it looks like the goal of the Volkstaat will be pursued constitutionally but will always be the organizational template that allows the emergence of violence, with the paramilitaries assuming the effective leadership, if the political process breaks down as a result of Black-Black conflict. This is because the ideal of the Volkstaat it is a goal that the paramilitary factions have grass roots support for within the larger ethnic group. The idea of the White homeland will persist as a symbol of national identity for Afrikaners in a democratic South Africa. Most Afrikaners today are urbanized and modern in their interests and lifestyles so it won't be a main option, just as "UDI" (unilaterally declared independence) for Ulster hasn't succeeded except as a symbolic alternative. An independent Ulster would mean drop in living standards for Protestants as well as Catholics in Northern Ireland. Only the most ideological of the paramilitaries, and some fundamentalist Protestants would actually enjoy it as a political reality.

The results of my study show that the Afrikaners and the Ulster Protestants use similar political strategies although different details and events distinguish the two groups, reflecting the uniqueness of particular histories. These similarities are due to the interaction of cultural factors and economic forces typical of post colonial social settings and especially of former British colonies. These organizational strategies, which include political violence, constitute a form of ethnicity.

Like other ethnic groups throughout the world, Ulster Protestants and Afrikaners make use of pre-existing organizations and locally based social groups and institutions as the framework of their organizational networks. While conveying a considerable organizational advantage, the use of locally-based pre-existing organizations, such as churches, is partly responsible for the typically conservative, even traditionalist, ideological stance and symbolism of those political movements identified as "ethnic" by social scientists.

At the present time, almost one year after the first democratic elections in April, 1994, South Africa seems to be settling down to a state of violent equilibrium. This reflects a post colonial version of the strong state-high social conflict political configuration. This is a situation where

low-level organized political violence, and related high rates of criminal violence, are mainly localized as permanent feature of townships and former homelands.

South Africa will be a multi racial, democratic, version of the Afrikaner "laager" society, both living with and defending itself against the poor masses. It will continue to be a physically dangerous society compared to Western Europe (especially for the poor who have to live in these areas) but it will "work" politically and economically with a authoritarian/liberal government controlling but not eradicating violence through periodic and localized suppression by the multi-racial State.

The Afrikaner paramilitaries will continue to maintain their micro-territorial strongholds and threaten succession on the basis of these urban and rural enclaves of Afrikanerdom. This mostly rhetorical threat will be one of the oppositional factors that actually holds the multi-racial democratic coalition together. The ideal of the Volkstaat will persist along with the regional and urban Black opposition movements (PAC-APLA, Inkatha etc.) and the White paramilitary, Afrikaner secessionist organizations. These endemic and localized factors will represent political fault lines and latent sources of political and communal violence. They will serve as the cultural themes and scenarios around which conflict in the "new South Africa" will continue to be organized. Similarly, paramilitarism will persist as a latent factor in Northern Irish politics no matter what the eventual outcome of the present cease-fire will be, a lasting peace or the resumption of political violence.

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